Sustaining the Environment

PETER SCHLOSSER
EARTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING

Any one of Peter Schlosser’s three jobs could be a full-time undertaking. First, he studies Earth’s hydrosphere, past and present climate, and human impact on the environment as Vinton Professor of Earth and Environmental Engineering and professor of earth and environmental sciences.

Second, as senior staff scientist at Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, he is involved in an array of large scientific programs that support such things as international polar research. Finally, he is the associate director and director of research at the Earth Institute.

Rather than keeping them separate in his mind and on his plate, however, he tackles all three by doing the exact opposite. “They all retain some distinct character,” said Schlosser. “But in my daily life, they are all intertwined.”

Not only are they intertwined, but they also speak to the way Schlosser has always approached his work. As an undergraduate student in his native Germany, he chose to study physics at a university with a long tradition and broadly based research and teaching because, he said, he wanted to see science as a holistic part of the entire university. Physics, he felt, gave him the opportunity to acquire a set of skills that would be useful for studying a wide range of scientific problems with societal relevance.

He eventually ended up in environmental physics, in part because of a natural curiosity in the world around him. Since arriving at Columbia in 1989, Schlosser has continued to feed his omnivorous curiosity about his surroundings by fostering connections with faculty members from departments across campus.

That broad perspective has helped him become a key part of efforts to establish and expand the Earth Institute, an initiative that brings together faculty and students from throughout Columbia to search for ways to foster sustainable development as an academic discipline. Schlosser has been integral in guiding the Institute’s research agenda, which focuses on developing practical solutions to the problems that humankind faces in designing a sustainable future. At the same time, he recently founded the Columbia Climate Center, a part of the Earth Institute that specifically addresses society’s needs for strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

“Whether we can turn the world from a non-sustainable to a sustainable path has been on my mind a lot,” said Schlosser. “I don’t think we have a real answer yet, but the important thing is that we can see a path forward that is supported by technological innovation.”

In addition, Schlosser sees the need—now more than ever—for a greater emphasis to be placed on communicating the messages of science clearly and accurately to a public that is often charged with making difficult decisions about what policies to enact and how to allocate resources to achieve a sustainable future. Exactly how to do that is a difficult question, but one that he feels should be answerable if involvement from many different fields across campus can be achieved.

“That, to me, is enough motivation to continue working and to look for solutions.”